CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX
Surprise. Anger. Joy.

Flora stood and stared at the sign on apartment 267. It was made of fake wood and engraved with white letters that spelled out the words RESIDING WITHIN: THE DR.'S MEESCHAM!

What was the apostrophe doing there? Did the doctor own the Meescham? And what was it with exclamation marks? Did people not know what they were for?

Surprise, anger, joy — that's what exclamation marks were for. They had nothing to do with who resided where.

But at this particular moment, the exclamation mark seemed entirely appropriate. It *was* terribly exciting that a doctor (who didn't know how to use apostrophes) lived in apartment 267.

"What are you staring at?" said her father. He was putting his key into the door of apartment 271, and he was laughing softly.

"A doctor lives here," said Flora.

"Dr. Meescham," said her father.

"I'm going to see if he can help with Ulysses," said Flora.

"Excellent idea," said her father. He opened the door of his apartment. He looked to the left and then to the right. "Keep your eyes open for Mr. Klaus!" he said. "I'll join you in a bit!"

He slammed the door just as Flora raised her hand to knock on Dr. Meescham's door.

But she didn't get the chance to knock.

The door swung open of its own accord. An old lady stood there smiling, her dentures glowing white in the perpetual green twilight of the hallway. Someone inside the apartment was screaming. No, someone was singing. It was opera. Opera music.

"At last," said the old lady. "I'm so glad to see your face."

Flora turned and looked behind her.

"I am speaking to you, little flower."

"Me?" said Flora.

"Yes, you. Little flower. Flora Belle. Beloved of your father, Mr. George Buckman. Come in, little flower. Come in."

"Actually," said Flora, "I'm looking for a doctor. I have a medical emergency."

Residing
within:
The Dr.'s
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267

"Of course, of course," said the old woman. "We are, all of us, medical emergencies! You must come in now. I have been waiting for so long."

She reached out and yanked Flora over the threshold of 267 and into the apartment.

The Criminal Element had a lot to say about entering the home of a stranger. They suggested that you do so at your own risk, and that if you did make the (questionable) decision to enter the home of someone you didn't know, a door to the outside world should be left open at all times to facilitate a quick escape.

The old lady slammed the door shut.

The opera music was very loud now.

Flora looked down at the hand that was on her arm. It was spotted and wrinkled.

Beloved? thought Flora. *Me?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN
Singing with the Angels

He woke with a single, giant watery eye staring at him.

He blinked. His head hurt. The gigantic eye was mesmerizing and beautiful. It was like staring at a small planet, a whole sad and lonely world.

Ulysses found it hard to look away.

He stared at the eye, and the eye stared back.

Was he dead? Had he been hit over the head with a shovel?

He could hear someone singing. He knew he should be afraid, but he didn't feel afraid. So much had happened to him in the last twenty-four hours that somewhere along the way, he had stopped worrying. Everything had become interesting, as opposed to worrisome.

If he was dead, well, that was interesting, too.

"My eyesight is not what it was," said a voice. "When I was a girl in Blundermeecen, I could read the sign before anyone else even saw the sign. Not that it helped me, seeing things clearly. Sometimes, it is safer not to see. In Blundermeecen, the words on the sign were often not the truth. And I ask you: What good does it do you to read the words of a lie? But that is a different story. I will tell that story later. I find this magnifying glass to be of great assistance. Yes. Yes. I see him. He is very much alive."

"I know he's alive," said another voice. "I can tell that."

Flora! Flora was here with him. How comforting.

"Hmmm, yes. I see. He is a squirrel."

"For the love of Pete!" said Flora. "I know he's a squirrel."

"He is missing much fur," said the voice.

"What kind of doctor are you?" said Flora.

The voices in the room kept singing. They were full of sadness and love and desperation. The voice belonging to the giant eye hummed along with them.

Ulysses tried to get to his feet.

A gentle hand pushed him back.

"I am the Dr. Meescham who is the doctor of philosophy," said the voice. "My husband, the other Dr. Meescham, was the medical doctor. But he has passed away. This is a euphemism, of course. I mean to say that he is dead. He is departed from this world. He is elsewhere and singing with the angels. Ha, there is another euphemism: singing with the angels. I ask you, why is it so hard to stay away from the euphemisms? They creep in, always, and attempt to make the difficult things more pleasing. So. Let me try again. He is dead, the other Dr. Meescham, the medical one. And I hope that he is somewhere singing. Perhaps singing something from Mozart. But who knows where he is and what he is doing?"

"For the love of Pete!" said Flora again. "I need a medical doctor. Ulysses might have a concussion."

"Shhh, shhh, calm, calm. Why are you so agitated? There is no need to worry. You are worried about what? You will tell me what happened that makes you think concussion."

"He hit a door," said Flora. "With his head."

"Hmmm, yes. This could give a concussion. When I was a girl in Blundermeecen, people were often getting concussions — gifts from the trolls, you understand."

"Gifts from the trolls?" said Flora. "What are you talking about? Look at him. Does he look like he has a concussion?"

The gigantic eye of Dr. Meescham came closer, much closer. It studied him. The beautiful voices sang. Dr. Meescham hummed. Ulysses felt strangely peaceful. If he spent the rest of his life being stared at by a giant eye and hummed over, things could be worse.

"The pupils of his little eyes are not dilated," said Dr. Meescham.

"Dilated pupils," said Flora. "I couldn't remember that one."

"So, this is good. This is a hopeful sign. Next we will see if he remembers what happened. We will check for amnesia."

Flora's face came into view. He was glad to see her and her round head. "Ulysses," she said, "do you remember what happened? Do you remember being in the Giant Do-Nut?"

Did he remember being in Rita's hair? Did he remember Rita screaming? Did he remember the man with the knife? Did he remember flying? Did he

remember hitting his head very hard? Did he remember *not* getting to eat a giant donut? Let's see: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. And yes.

He nodded.

"Oh," said Dr. Meescham. "He nods his head. He communicates with you."

"He's, um, different. Special," said Flora. "A special kind of squirrel."

"Excellent! Good! I believe this!"

"Something happened to him."

"Yes, he hit a door with his head."

"No," said Flora, "before that. He was vacuumed. You know, sucked up in a vacuum cleaner."

There was a small silence. And then there was more humming from Dr. Meescham. Ulysses tried again to get to his feet and was again pushed gently back.

"You are speaking euphemistically?" said Dr. Meescham.

"I'm not," said Flora. "I'm speaking literally. He was vacuumed. It changed him."

"Certainly it did!" said Dr. Meescham. "Absolutely, it changed him to be vacuumed." She raised her magnifying glass to her eye and leaned in close, studying him. She lowered the magnifying glass. "How did it change him, please?"

Ulysses stood on all fours, and no one pushed him back.

"You will speak without euphemisms," said Dr. Meescham.

"He has powers," said Flora. "He's strong. And he can fly." She paused. "Also, he types. He writes, um, poetry."

"A typewriter! Poetry! Flight!" said Dr. Meescham. She sounded delighted.

"His name is Ulysses."

"This," said Dr. Meescham, "is an important name."

"Well," said Flora, "it was the name of the vacuum cleaner that almost killed him."

Dr. Meescham looked Ulysses in the eye.

It was rare for someone to look a squirrel in the eye.

Ulysses pulled himself up straighter. He looked back at Dr. Meescham. He met her gaze.

"You must also list among his powers the ability to understand. This is no small thing, to understand," Dr. Meescham said to Flora. And then she turned

back to Ulysses. "You are feeling maybe a little sick to the stomach?"

Ulysses shook his head.

"Good," said Dr. Meescham. She clapped her hands together. "I am thinking that Ulysses is not concussed. There is only this little cut on his head, other than that: fine, good, great! I am thinking that maybe the squirrel is hungry."

Ulysses nodded.

Yes, yes! He was very hungry. He would like eggs sunny-side up.

He would like a donut. With sprinkles.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT
Unremitting Darkness

"You," said Dr. Meescham to Flora, "will have a seat on the sofa and listen to the Mozart, and I will go and make us some sandwiches."

"What about my father?" said Flora. "Shouldn't I tell him where I am?"

"Mr. George Buckman knows where you are," said Dr. Meescham. "He knows that you are safe. So, good. All is good. You will sit on the horsehair sofa, please."

Dr. Meescham went into the kitchen, and Flora turned and looked at the couch. It was a huge couch. She dutifully sat down on it and then slowly, very slowly, slid off it.

"Wow," she said.

She climbed back up on the couch and concentrated on staying put. She sat with her hands on either side of her and her legs straight out in front of her. She felt like an oversize doll. She also felt very, very tired. And a tiny bit confused.

Maybe I'm in shock, she thought.

TERRIBLE THINGS CAN HAPPEN TO YOU! had done an issue listing the symptoms of shock, but Flora couldn't remember what they were.

Was one of the symptoms of shock that you couldn't remember the symptoms of shock?

She looked over at Ulysses. He was still sitting on the dining-room table. He looked confused, too.

She waved at him, and he nodded back.

And then she noticed that there was a picture hanging on the wall opposite the couch. It was a painting of what looked like nothing but darkness. Unremitting darkness.

"Unremitting darkness" was a phrase that occurred often in *The Criminal Element,* but why would someone paint a picture of unremitting darkness?

Flora slid off the couch and walked over to the painting and stared at it more closely. In the middle of all the darkness, there was a tiny boat. It was

floating on a black sea. Flora put her face right up against the painting. Something was wrapped around the boat, some tentacled shadow.

For the love of Pete! The tiny boat on the dark sea was getting eaten by a giant squid.

Flora's heart protested with a small thud of fear. "Holy bagumba," she whispered.

From the kitchen, there came the sound of clinking silverware and crashing plates. The opera music ended.

"Ulysses?" said Flora.

She looked behind her and saw the squirrel sitting on the floor, sniffing his tail.

"Come here," she said to him.

He walked over to her, and she picked him up and put him on her shoulder. "Look," she said.

He stared at the painting.

"This boat is getting eaten by a gigantic squid."

He nodded.

"It's a tragedy," said Flora. "There are people on board that boat. Look, you can see them. They're ant-size. But they're people."

Ulysses squinted. He nodded again.

"They're all going to die," explained Flora. "Every last one of them. As a superhero, you should be outraged. You should want to save them. Incandesto would!"

"Ah," said Dr. Meescham, coming up behind them, "you are studying my poor, lonely giant squid."

"Lonely?" said Flora.

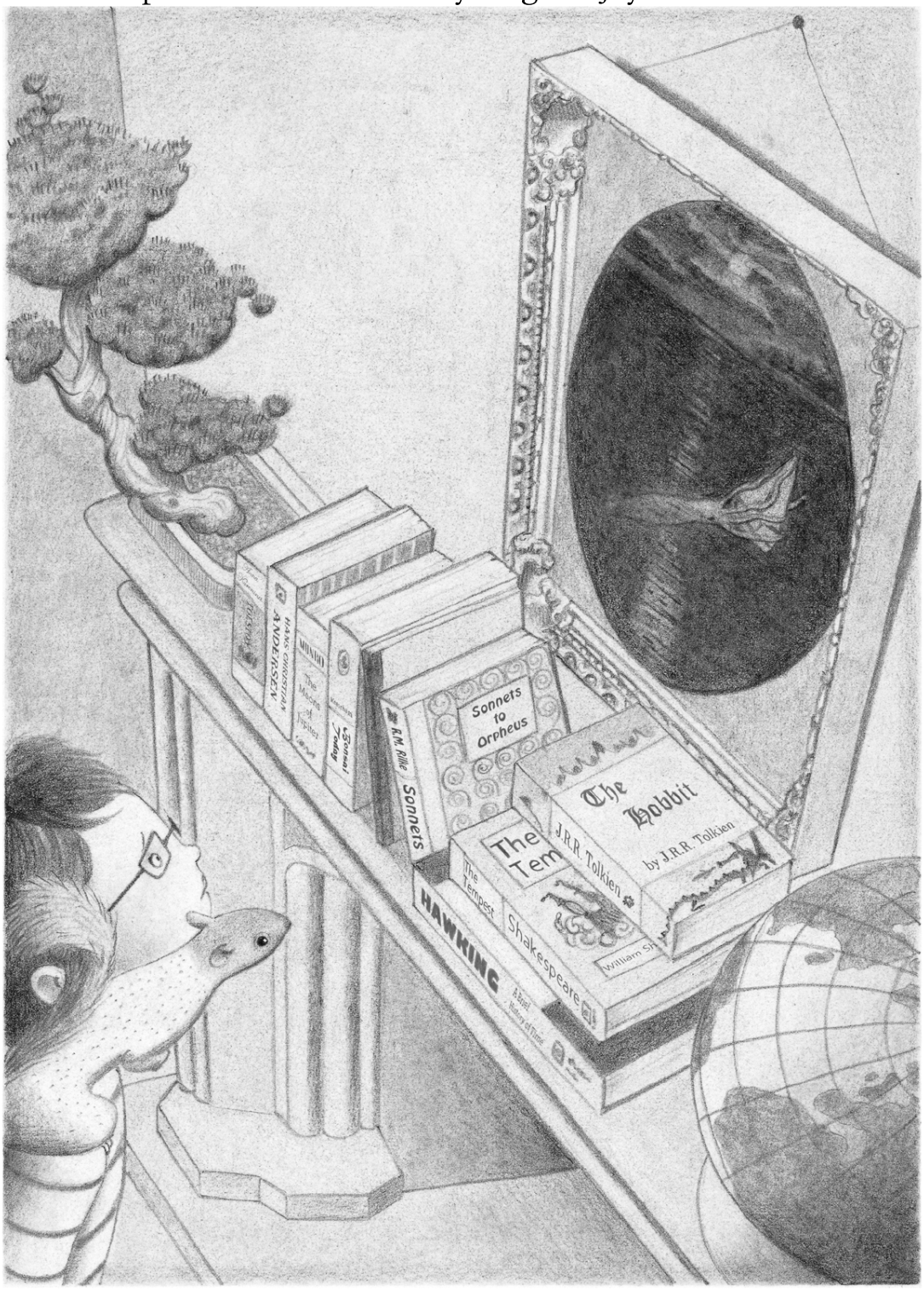
"The giant squid is the loneliest of all God's creatures. He can sometimes go for the whole of his life without seeing another of his kind."

For some reason, Dr. Meescham's words conjured up the face of William Spiver, white haired and dark eyed. Flora's heart squinched up. *Go away, William Spiver,* she thought.

"That squid is a villain," said Flora out loud. "He needs to be vanquished. He's eating a boat. And he's going to eat all the people on the boat."

"Yes, well, loneliness makes us do terrible things," said Dr. Meescham. "And that is why the picture is there, to remind me of this. Also, because the other

Dr. Meescham painted it when he was young and joyful."



Good grief, thought Flora. *What did he paint when he was old and depressed?*

"Now, you will sit on the horsehair sofa, please," said Dr. Meescham, "and I will bring out the jelly sandwiches."

Flora sat down on the couch. Ulysses was still on her shoulder. She put up her hand and touched him. He was warm. He was a small engine of warmness.

"The giant squid is the loneliest creature in all existence," said Flora out loud.

And then, to keep things grounded and in perspective, she muttered, "Seal blubber."

And then she whispered, "Do not hope; instead, observe."

She kept her hand on the squirrel.